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AUTHOR Kram, Judith
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ABSTRACT

Action must be taken to eliminate sex-role stereotyping. Elementary school textbooks are tracking children into narrowly defined sex roles which are demeaning to girls and detrimental to both girls and boys. The first step is to research the material currently in use in order to collect specific illustrations with which to arm oneself. The next step is to publicize these findings. The media is a useful tool for communicating the problem and for recruiting support. Contact businesses, urging them to sponsor a program on the subject. From here a simultaneous, multistrategic approach is suggested. Concerned individuals and organizations must pressure legislatures and boards of education to prohibit the use of sex-role stereotypical material in the public schools. You should also meet with the textbook selection officials. School systems can refuse to buy material which does not meet guidelines. Work closely with textbook publishing companies. The current trend away from the use of textbooks is a significant development. For several years feminists have been writing children's books which can be used in individualized reading programs. These same books can be used outside the classroom. Speak to both the school and local librarians. Finally, contact the women's organizations in your area. Some sources of information are listed in the bibliography. (Author/JM)

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SEX ROLE STEREOTYPING IN TEXTBOOKS: WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

by

Judith Kram
Mass. Governor's Commission
on the Status of Women

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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Boys are clever, resourceful, industrious, independent and strong; girls are altruistic, emotional, fearful, weak and incompetent. This is the lesson elementary school children learn from their readers.[1]

A substantial number of individuals and organizations have carried out content analyses of textbooks[2] - the outcomes are the same. The statistics and data are voluminous and they all lead to the same conclusion: Textbooks are tracking children into narrowly defined sex roles which are demeaning to girls and detrimental to both girls and boys.

Action must be taken to eliminate sex-role stereotyping from instructional material. The first step is to research the material currently in use in order to collect specific illustrations with which to arm oneself. The next step is to publicize these findings. The media is a useful tool for communicating the problem and for recruiting support.

Submit letters to the editor. These columns provide free publicity and reach a wide and diverse audience. Keep your local newspapers, radio and television stations informed of your findings and your efforts to combat sex biased instructional material.

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Besides dealing with the media directly, contact businesses, urging them to sponsor a program on the subject. From here there are several possible courses of action; I suggest a simultaneous, multi-strategic approach.

To begin with, it is imperative that concerned individuals and organizations pressure legislatures, state and federal, and Boards of Education to prohibit the use of sex-role stereotypical material in the public schools. Write letters. A letter from a group carries more weight than one from an individual. Even if there are only two of you, it pays to establish yourselves as a group and to spend the money to print up stationery. Write to your senators, congresswo/man and the chairperson of the State Board of Education. For local grievances, write the chairperson of your local school committee. If you do not receive a response, write to the Commissioner of Education. The steps will depend on the specific circumstances. I suggest making a few investigatory calls; it is important to address your initial complaint to the appropriate party to save time and to avoid alienating potential supporters.

At present at least three states, California, Iowa and New Jersey have passed legislation and the Boards of Education of Colorado, Maryland, New Jersey, South Dakota and West Virginia have passed or proposed resolutions. (To help those concerned learn from the past experiences of others, many feminist organizations have developed guides which include methods for combatting sexism in textbooks. A partial list of publications and addresses from which they may be obtained is available free of charge from the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on the Status

of Women.[3])

You are apt to run up against resistance from those who contest that such legislation and resolutions abridge the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech. However, Holly Knox, director of PEER (Project on Equal Education Rights) a new project of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, points out that "State and local school officials already routinely review and select textbooks."[4] Feminists are only asking that these officials incorporate measures to avoid the adoption of sex biased materials.

Strong legislation would enable feminists to take school systems to court. Under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Kalamazoo Committee to Study Sex Discrimination in the Public Schools filed a complaint against the Kalamazoo School System for its purchase of a $68,000 Houghton Mifflin reading series which the Committee claims discriminates against women.

While lobbying for legislation, you should also meet with the textbook selection officials. At the state level, this may mean contacting a textbook selection committee or a division of curriculum planning/instructional materials. Within an individual system, a coordinator of elementary education or individual teachers may be responsible for textbook selection. These are a few of the titles to look for. The specific course of action will be determined by the specific course of action will be determined by the specific selection process. The point here is to let the proper officials know you are concerned and want to meet with them.

School systems be they state or local, can also exert pressure by refusing to buy material which does not meet guidelines established

for portrayal of the sexes. After consent by the proper authorities, in most cases the School Committee, official letters should be sent to every textbook publishing company informing them of the decision not to purchase material which fails to meet specific criteria; a copy of the guidelines should be included. The system may choose to develop its own guidelines or may choose to adopt those already established by a publishing house, State Department of Education, or feminist group. (A list of guidelines and addresses from which copies may be obtained is available free of charge from the Mass. Governor's Commission on the Status of Women.)

A system's influence is directly related to the amount of money in question. A thirty million dollar market such as Texas will have more influence than a local school district. The prestige of the system may also be a factor. A small but outstanding system which is reputed to be a leader will have influence.

Work closely with textbook publishing companies. Criticize sexist material, providing specific examples and offering alternatives wherever possible. Also remember to commend companies for their good material.

However, the problem of eliminating sex-role stereotypes from textbooks is largely one of economics. To publish a single textbook requires a tremendous amount of money. While textbook publishing houses are concerned with the problem, they cannot afford to make much more than cosmetic changes in their present publications. Many companies have committed themselves to eliminating sex bias from future publications; however, it takes at least two years for the production, writing and printing, of a textbook

which must then be approved by the appropriate adoption committee and ordered, usually one year in advance of its usage, by the teacher or school system. According to an education kit developed by the Women's Equity Action League, "It takes half a million dollars to launch a new series and five years to get that series from writer to child."[5]

Because textbooks are so expensive to produce, the current trend away from their use is a significant development. Many elementary schools have replaced traditional reading programs with individualized reading programs. Paperback readers are replacing textbook series such as the notorious Dick and Jane series. For several years feminists have been writing children's books which can be used in these individualized reading programs. Feminist presses have been established to help facilitate the publication of books of this kind. (A list of bibliographies and catalogs of non-sexist children's books is available free of charge from the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on the Status of Women.)

These same books can be used outside of the classroom to supplement a child's classroom reading material. Speak to both the school and local librarians. Encourage them to purchase storybooks from these lists of non-sexist books. Encourage them to provide biographies of famous women, particularly those who excelled in traditionally male roles, for example, Elizabeth Blackwell, the first female doctor; and those who worked for women's rights, for example Susan B. Anthony and the Pankhursts, mother and daughter. Ms. magazine publishes articles on "lost women." Suggest that the libraries purchase women's magazines such as Ms. and Womansport.

The emphasis of feminist presses has been on the publication

of material which deals solely with women. There is undoubtedly a need for supplementary material. However, in addition, students have been studying the history of man (and woman) for too long; there remains a need for integrated material.

There is also a need for easily accessible bibliographies and samples of non-sexist curricula for teachers who are concerned about sex-role stereotyping but who for lack of time, commitment or resources are unable to do their own research.

For those interested in carrying out such a project, I make the following suggestions:

1. Decide on the subject area and reading level for investigation. Choose a narrow focus, e.g. fifth grade history or fifth grade math, and combine bibliographies at the end if so desired.

2. Decide what type of instructional material to investigate, e.g. integrated textbooks or supplementary material.

3. Familiarize yourself with the field before investigating available material in order to clearly define beforehand what an acceptable text should include. (In an area such as history, most people are unfamiliar with women's contributions and therefore, are unaware of what constitutes accurate and adequate material.)

4. Remember: Written authorization is required for each piece of copyrighted material to be included in any document intended for publication, unless it is an excerpt of less than 300 words used for illustrative purposes.

Because there is a scarcity of adequate material, teachers must acquire compensatory skills. In Kalamazoo, the Committee to Study Sex Discrimination in the Public Schools pasted annotations and supplements into the present material while awaiting the outcome of their complaint. Stop Sex Role Stereotypes in

Elementary Education,[6] by Martha Cohen for ConnPIRG, contains an excellent section on teacher training as well as methods for using deficient material. This is just one of many in-service training manuals.

Ethel Sadowsky, Chairwoman of the Education Task Force of the Mass. Governor's Commission on the Status of Women, suggests using such slide tapes as "Dick and Jane as Victims" by Women on Words and Images and "The Hidden Curriculum" by a group of Seattle women, studies of elementary school textbooks, to help teachers become aware of what is harmful and inhibiting in the instructional material they are using. (A partial list of films and slide shows of this nature is included in the Macleod-Silverman appendix.)[7]

Finally, contact the women's organizations in your area. Keep them informed of your plans; you may be able to work together.

FOOTNOTES

1. Dick and Jane as Victims: Sex-Role Stereotyping in Children's Readers, Women on Words and Images, 1972. Contact: Phyllis Alroy, P.O. Box 2163, Princeton, N.J. 08540.

2. Macleod and Silverman, "YOU WON'T DO", Pittsburgh, KNOW, Inc., 1973. Includes an annotated source list, "Sexism in Textbooks: 150+ Studies and Remedies." Available from: KNOW, Inc., P.O. Box 86031, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15221. $2.25 (fourth class); $3.00 (air mail).

3. Massachusetts Governor's Commission on the Status of Women, 100 Cambridge Street, Room 2108, Boston 02202.

4. From a Washington, D.C. press conference, Oct. 15, 1974. For additional information contact Holly Knox, PEER, 522 Conneticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

5. The WEAL K-12 Education Kit is available for $1.25 from WEAL, 538 National Press Building, Washington, D.C. 20036.

6. Available free of charge from ConnPIRG, Box 1517, Hartford, Conn.

7. Macleod and Silverman, op. cit.